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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of a modified version of the 1983 Gallup Poll survey of parents of school-aged children in South Dakota. Parents of elementary and secondary school students were asked to grade the nation's and their state's schools and were surveyed on the following topics: their perceptions of the causes of discipline problems, their willingness to raise taxes for local schools, their desire for higher standards for South Dakota schools, their feelings about lengthening the school day or year, their feelings about computer education, their perceptions of teachers' salaries, their response to "A Nation at Risk," their sources of information about schools, and their involvement in the schools. Findings include the following: The majority of these parents do not want the school year or day lengthened, want more computer education, are willing to pay higher taxes, and support merit pay for teachers. The parents assign schools a "B" grade, obtain the majority of their information about schools from their children, and are actively involved in school activities. Overall the study reveals a positive attitude toward education in South Dakota. (MD)

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ATTITUDES OF SOUTH DAKOTA ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY PARENTS TOWARD THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

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MAY 1985

For the past sixteen years a Gallup Poll has been conducted annually to determine the American public's attitude toward the public schools. The findings of this survey are published each fall in the PHI DELTA KAPPAN, the journal published by the educational organization, Phi Delta Kappa. The results of the 1983 poll were made available in the September, 1983 issue of the KAPPAN.

That study looked at many and varied educational concerns. The first question asked the public dealt with the biggest problem facing public schools today. The answer was, as it has been for many years, discipline in the schools. This extensive look at education goes on to measure attitudes on tax increases, causes for school discipline problems, use of national test scores, homework, required curriculum, merit pay for teachers and much more.

This annual poll has become an extremely important tool for educators involved in decision-making roles within the schools. The survey results help professional educators understand the public's attitudes toward many different educational problems and programs. As Gallup explained the value of the poll in his introductory remarks in 1983, the poll serves as a national benchmark and local attitudes can be measured against it. Taking this a step further, those involved in the project encouraged local school

EA 017 829

people to use the survey in any way that would help assess attitudes and ideas in their own area. Modification of the survey was also condoned, and even encouraged, by the original researchers.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The 1983 Gallup Poll was modified somewhat in order to survey parents in South Dakota. The study investigated the attitudes of parents of elementary and secondary students. Some questions were changed slightly to make the poll more germane to education in South Dakota.

The population for the South Dakota study was the total number of public elementary and secondary schools in the state of South Dakota. A sample of 100 elementary and 100 secondary schools were chosen using a table of random numbers. After the schools were selected, a method was devised to assure a balanced selection of parents with children representing all grade levels. The principals of the elementary schools received the poll materials in January, 1984. The principals were asked to randomly select one classroom at a designated grade level identified by the investigators. Within the designated classroom each teacher was asked to select randomly five elementary students to take the questionnaire home to their parents. Following this technique 500 parents were given the opportunity to participate in the survey. Sixty percent of the parents returned the questionnaire.

Secondary administrators received the same materials in the fall of 1984 and were asked to randomly select five students from an English class in a designated grade level. The assumption here was that English is required at all grade levels and all students in secondary schools must be enrolled in an English class. The materials were mailed to selected parents from the school. Forty percent of the parents returned the questionnaires. The major limitation

of this study was the low response rate received from the secondary parents.

After the information was received by the investigators, percentages were calculated for each response option on the poll.

Participants were asked to provide some general information about themselves. From this data we can generalize that the average parent respondent was female, married, a high school graduate, between thirty and forty five years of age. There was broad representation from all South Dakota communities, large and small.

FINDINGS OF STUDY

South Dakota Schools Get "B" Grades

When parents responded to a question asking for a letter grade for their local school 53% of the elementary parents gave their own public school a "B" and 58% of the secondary parents gave a "B". Fifteen percent of elementary parents thougnt "A" was the appropriate grade while only 10% of secondary parents gave an "A". Twenty four percent of elementary parents gave a "C" and 3% gave a "D", 25% of secondary parents gave a "C" while 4% gave a "D". Only 1% of elementary parents thought their school should be given an "F". A doubtful 4% of elementary parents and 3% of secondary parents didn't know what grade to award their school.

The South Dakota parents perception of schools in the nation as a whole was quite different. Only 2% of elementary parents thought schools in general should receive a grade of "A" and none of the secondary parents polled gave an "A", 18% of elementary parents awarded a "B", 17% of secondary parents gave a "B". Fifty percent thought "C" was the right grade among elementary parents and 53% among secondary parents thought "C" was appropriate. A "D" was given by 14% and an "F" by 1% of elementary parents, 15% and 1% gave "D" and "F"

among the secondary parents. Fifteen percent of elementary parents and 14% of secondary parents said they didn't know what grade should be given.

Hereafter, percentage responses of elementary parents will be presented first followed by responses of secondary parents.

More specific parental grades are shown in Table I which covers a broad spectrum of educational concerns.

TABLE I

GRADING EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS

Responses in percentage

Elementary Parents

	A	B	C	D	F	Don't Know
The physical plants and facilities	20	45	24	7	0	4
The curriculum, that is, the subjects offered	22	47	27	2	1	1
The handling of extracurricular activities--- sports, theatre, etc.	15	39	29	12	2	3
Books and instructional materials	23	50	21	2	1	3
Quality of teaching	23	48	23	3	0	3
Education students get	20	54	20	3	0	3
The way schools are administered	18	34	34	7	3	4
Preparing students for college	11	40	29	8	2	10
The way discipline is handled	17	34	32	10	4	3
Preparing for jobs for those students not planning to go to college	7	25	33	13	4	18
Behavior of students	11	43	35	7	3	1

Secondary Parents

	A	B	C	D	F	Don't Know
The physical plants and facilities	18	43	26	5	3	5
The curriculum, that is, the subjects offered	20	45	27	6	0	2
The handling of extracurricular activites--- sports, theater, etc.	15	39	34	9	1	2
Books and instructional materials	19	52	22	3	1	3
Quality of teaching	14	50	26	5	1	4
Education students get	14	50	28	4	0	4

TABLE 1 (Cont.)

	Secondary Parents					
	A	B	C	D	F	Don't Know
The way schools are administered	13	41	30	8	3	5
Preparing students for college	13	45	24	12	2	4
The way discipline is handled	13	39	27	16	2	3
Preparing for jobs for those students not planning to go to college	7	27	42	16	2	6
Behavior of students	10	49	32	5	0	4

Reasons for Discipline Problems

Discipline has often been viewed as a serious problem facing education. Table 2 presents South Dakota parents' perceptions of reasons which are most important in explaining why there is a discipline problem today.

The percentage of responses given each of the eleven statements is as follows, listed according to frequency of mention.

TABLE 2

CAUSES OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Responses in Percentage

Elementary Parents

67 Lack of discipline in the home
52 Lack of respect for law and authority throughout society
36 Decline in the teaching of good manners
34 The courts have made school administrators so cautious that they don't deal severely with student misbehavior
30 Some teachers are not properly trained to deal with discipline problems
29 Viewing television programs that emphasize crime and violence
29 Students who are constant troublemakers often can't be removed from school
29 Punishment is too lenient
24 Teachers themselves do not command respect
23 One-parent families
16 Failure on the part of teachers to make classroom work more interesting
9 Other _____

TABLE 2 (Cont.)

Secondary Parents

83	Lack of discipline in the home
65	Lack of respect for law and authority throughout society
46	Decline in the teaching of good manners
40	The courts have made school administrators so cautious that they don't deal severely with student misbehavior
40	Some teachers are not properly trained to deal with discipline problems
39	Teachers themselves do not command respect
34	One-parent families
33	Viewing television programs that emphasize crime and violence
30	Students who are constant troublemakers often can't be removed from school
28	Punishment is too lenient
23	Failure on the part of teachers to make classroom work more interesting
14	Other _____

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple responses.)

Parents Willing to Pay More

When asked if they would be willing to vote for raising taxes if more money was needed for local schools 42% of the elementary parents said they would vote for such a measure and 45% of secondary parents said they would agree. Thirty two percent of elementary parents said they would not vote for raising taxes while 30% of secondary parents said no, 26% of elementary parents and 25% of secondary parents said they didn't know.

A similar, but broader question asked parents if they would be willing to pay more taxes to raise the standards of education in the total United States. Fifty one percent and 46% agreed they would pay more while 28% and 31% said no. Twenty one percent and 23% were in the "don't know" category.

Higher Standards Desired by South Dakota Parents

Numerous questions about grades, standards and promotions found that South Dakotans held high aspirations for their children. For example, 61% and 47% said children should not be promoted to the next grade if they couldn't

pass examinations. Thirty three percent and 41% did not agree and 6% and 12% did not know.

A sizable majority of 78% and 76% would like to see their local schools give national tests so educational achievement could be compared with other communities. Eighteen percent and 16% said no while 4% and 8% did not know.

An obvious difference between elementary and high school expectations emerged. When asked if elementary children worked "too hard", "not hard enough" or "about the right amount", 71% of the elementary parents said their children worked about right. In response to the same question concerning high school students only 22% of the elementary parents felt they worked "about the right amount", while 43% felt high school students aren't required to work hard enough.

In response to the same question 72% of the secondary parents said elementary children worked "about the right amount", 4% said they worked "too hard" and 19% said they worked "not hard enough." The response differed markedly from the elementary parents when 60% of the secondary parents said high school students worked "about the right amount." Five percent of the parents of high school students said high school students worked "too Hard" and 29% said they worked "not hard enough."

Parents indicated by an overwhelming majority of 88% and 81% that their children are learning the things they should be learning in school. They also indicated a strong belief in the value of a college education. Fifty nine percent and 58% viewed college as "very important" and another 38% and 36% said it is "fairly important." A scant 3% and 2% saw college as "not too important."

More School Not Needed

There has been much discussion recently about lengthening the school day

and also encouraging a longer school year. South Dakota parents gave a resounding NO to both suggestions. Seventy six percent and 81% opposed extending the school year and 76% and 74% opposed a school day that was one hour longer. Seventy nine percent and 72% also said they did not anticipate that schools will be in session for twelve months in the future.

Computer Education

The new technology was seen as more important to parents than a longer school year with computer education seen as essential to today's curriculum. Eighty two percent of elementary parents and 87% of secondary parents knew their school had a computer for their child to use and 92% and 85% categorically said they wanted computers in school for their children to use. Even more definitely 95% and 93% said all students will have access to computer training in the future.

Teacher's Salaries

A majority of 56% of the elementary parents and 61% of secondary parents surveyed viewed teacher's salaries as "too low." Only 2% of both groups said salaries were "too high", but a considerable minority of 34% and 32% thought they were "about right", while 8% and 5% had "no opinion."

Merit pay got parental approval with 71% and 61% saying teachers should be paid on the basis of the "quality of work" rather than on a standardized scale. Twenty three percent and 28% opted for the "standard scale." Six percent and 11% simply had no opinion on the salary controversy.

Table 3 indicates the personal qualities parents would choose in teachers if they could select them themselves. An interesting difference emerges between elementary and secondary parents in the matter of personal qualities desired in teachers. Secondary parents apparently view strong teaching abilities as most critical while elementary parents see care and concern for children as the first qualities needed.

TABLE 3

DESIRABLE PERSONAL QUALITIES IN TEACHERS

Responses in percentage

Elementary Parents

73	Caring about students
66	Patience
63	Friendliness, good personality, sense of humor
60	Dedication to teaching profession, enthusiasm
55	Intelligence
49	High moral character
48	Ability to discipline, to be firm and fair
45	Ability to inspire, motivate students
45	Ability to communicate, to understand, to relate

Secondary Parents

92	Ability to inspire, motivate students
86	Ability to discipline, to be firm and fair
86	Ability to communicate, to understand, to relate
83	Caring about students
71	Friendliness, good personality, sense of humor
70	Patience
67	Dedication to teaching profession, enthusiasm
62	High moral character
54	Intelligence

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple responses.)

A NATION AT RISK

The widely publicized report from the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education didn't appear to have caused a great deal of concern among South Dakota parents. A majority had read or heard something about the report, but 56% and 60% indicated they didn't know if they agreed or disagreed with the broad conclusions drawn. South Dakotans appear satisfied, even pleased, with their local schools, but tend to agree that nationally schools may well be deteriorating.

Information About Schools

How do parents make their judgments about schools? Table 4 presents parental sources of information about schools. Parents in the public schools get most information from their own children.

TABLE 4

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOLS

Responses in percentage

Elementary Parents		Secondary Parents	
75	Students	86	Students
64	Personal experience	76	School board/faculty
60	Parents of other students	68	Parents of students
52	School Board/Faculty	68	Personal experience
42	Newspapers	44	Newspapers
34	Other adults	37	Other adults
24	Other -- please state	15	Radio and/or television
13	Radio and/or Television	6	Other -- please state

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple responses.)

South Dakota parents of elementary and secondary students appear to be highly involved with their local schools. Table 5 shows the extent of parental involvement.

TABLE 5

TYPES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Responses in percentage

Elementary Parents	
83	Met with any teachers or administrators in the local public school
75	Attended a school play or concert in any local public school
74	Received any newsletter, pamphlet, or any other material telling what the local public schools are doing
65	Attended a local public school athletic event
33	Attended any meeting dealing with the local public school situation

TABLE 5 (Cont.)

24	Attended a PTA meeting
15	Attended a school board meeting
9	Written any letter to the school board, newspaper, or any other organization about the local school situation
1	None of the above
0	Don't know

Secondary Parents

88	Met with any teachers or administrators in the local public school about own child
86	Attended a local public school athletic event
73	Received any newsletter, pamphlet, or any other material telling what the local public schools are doing
69	Attended a school board meeting
60	Attended a school play or concern in any local public school
35	Attended any meeting dealing with the local public school situation
15	Attended a PTA meeting
2	Written any letter to the school board, newspaper, or any other organization about the local school situation
1	None of the above
0	Don't know

(Figures add to more than 100% because of multiple responses.)

Conclusions

The tentative conclusion which can be drawn from this study seems to say that South Dakota parents are satisfied with their schools as they are, but not so satisfied with them that they don't want to move toward higher standards and a continual upgrading of the curriculum.

Some of the findings of the study indicate that parents do not want to see any change in the length of the school day or year; parents want to see more technological education, particularly in computer technology; parents indicated a willingness to pay higher taxes to support education and to increase pay for teachers; they also supported the concept of merit pay for teachers; standardized tests for a standard of comparison with other schools were desired; parents believed their children are learning what they should be learning in the

schools for the most part; schools were assigned a "B" grade by a majority of the parents; parents expressed many reasons for discipline problems in the schools; parents receive a majority of their information regarding schools from their own children; South Dakota parents are actively involved in school activities; and a majority of the parents sampled believed their children are working hard enough in school. Elementary and secondary parents were found to be very similar in their responses to a majority of the questions asked.

South Dakota parental attitudes at both the elementary and secondary level appear to be that our schools and teachers are good but can be better. The concern over a national educational malaise does not seem to have affected South Dakota in any significant way. The study revealed a refreshingly positive attitude toward education in South Dakota.